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## HOW A WOMAN'S WIT SAVED CALIFORNIA

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For centuries the longing eyes of Europe had been turned toward India and the Far East. The glowing reports of the few adventurous travelers who had penetrated these regions from time to time aroused the cupidity of the people of Europe and fired them with an intense desire to share in this marvelous wealth.

India was a word to conjure with. It was this dream of the wealth of the Indies which led Columbus to brave the dangers of an unknown sea. His supposed success aroused the world and soon ships of every nation were pointing their prows towards this golden magnet.

When it was realized that the new-found world was not India, strenuous efforts were made to find a waterway across this continental barrier. Out of these centuries of fruitless search it slowly dawned upon the commercial world that the great highway to India lay directly across the continent.

From the first conception of this idea began the struggle for the possession of the Pacific Coast.

The commercial instinct of Great Britain early led her to secure a foothold on this coast, and once having a foothold she coveted the whole coast for her own. It was not the trade of these regions alone, great though it was, that led to this move, but she felt that the power holding the seaboard both on the Atlantic and the Pacific held within its grasp the key to the trade with the Orient.

In the beginning of this century Russia held all of Alaska and a station on the coast a little way above San Francisco. England possessed the mainland adjacent to Vancouver Island, and disputed with the United States for the possession of the Oregon country. The rest of the coast belonged to Spain.

Already some American statesman had dreamed of a great empire on the Pacific Coast growing out of the development of our western frontier, and some, at least, looking into futurity, saw the necessity of directing this stream of Oriental wealth to our own

shores—a dream which is only just now about to be fulfilled.

At the beginning of this century the Pacific Coast and all the intervening territory between that and the Mississippi River was a veritable *terra incognita*. But from time to time hunters, trappers and other adventurous spirits penetrated these wilds, and, coming back, told marvelous tales of eternal sunshine and fertile lands. Restless humanity turned longing eyes towards these regions. This spirit of territorial expansion crept into Congressional debate and began to educate our statesmen in the possibilities that lay before us.

Our thinking men were beginning to feel that all of the Pacific Coast opposite our eastern border, with all of the intervening territory naturally did, and eventually should, belong to us. This idea led them to keep a jealous eye on England's movements in the Pacific.

The Spanish possessions of Alta California were far from the home government, and held by a fiction of colonial authority that could easily be broken—and even after the independence of Mexico made this Mexican territory, it was practically as far from the then home government and as lightly held; and it was evident that at no distant day it would be owned by a stronger government. After a time the Russians abandoned their California settlements and retired to the extreme north.

Great Britain and France were understood to be watching for a pretext to interfere and take possession of the country. American statesmen, however, were alert to foil, if possible, any such attempt. Under government auspices and by private enterprise expedition after expedition had crossed the deserts and penetrated the fastnesses of the Rocky Mountains. At the time of our story, in 1842-3, the Oregon question was not yet settled, but was a source of great anxiety, and the cause of frequent communications between the governments.

St. Louis was at this time the great emporium of the West. It was here that traders and expeditions were fitted out, and it was here that returned trappers and travelers congregated. The stories of the wonders they saw, the rich plains, immense herds of buffalo and other game, great mountains, and golden opportunities, fired with enthusiasm the already restless population of the Eastern States. Emigrants began pouring into the Oregon country and were looking to the government for sympathy and for substantial aid. Thos. H.

Benton, Senator from Missouri, had his home here. He was a man of wide culture and of great influence in the national councils. There were none of the statesmen of that day who saw the possibilities of our country's future and who could plan for it as he.

His home was the center in which gathered men who held in common with him one great zeal for western expansion. Here travelers from the West met statesmen and tradesmen from the East and talked of the wonders of this newest world, and planned for this great consummation.

His daughter, Jessie Benton, was at this time but a miss in her teens, but of far greater average intelligence than most of her age. She was her father's amanuensis, and as such she listened with wonder and delight to these conversations, and early became enthused with their far-reaching plans.

The Mexican war was beginning to loom up on the political horizon. Causes growing out of the social conditions in the South were urging it on. This to many seemed the great question of the day, and, strange to relate, many of the New England men of influence joined with the southern men in their opposition to this western expansion. Western interests were by them relegated to the future. It is amusing in the light of today to read some of the debates in Congress on this subject. The whole country beyond St. Louis to the Pacific was declared valueless and that it could never be populated. It was feared that a strong stand by our government on the Oregon question would be resented by Great Britain, and it was to their interest in this junction in Mexican affairs to placate her, so they threw every obstacle in the way of this western movement. But Senator Benton threw the whole weight of his influence, political and social, in favor of this extension. He gathered about him in his Washington home a group of men who thought as he did. They not only saw with the mind's eye a great nation in the future, but also the necessity for a great commerce to sustain that nation in its greatness.

On the tombstone of Senator Benton at St. Louis is carved a hand with the finger pointing to the West, and underneath these words:

"There is the East,

"There is the road to India."

The dream of Columbus was still haunting the minds of men. About this time John C. Fremont, a young lieutenant of engineers,

became an inmate of Senator Benton's family, and was destined to play a considerable part in this opening of the West.

In 1842 Whitman, a missionary to Oregon, learned definitely of an attempt soon to be made by the British to fully occupy Oregon, which up to this time had been under the joint control of Great Britain and the United States.

His wonderful ride to Washington and its results is a matter of history. It aroused the country and lent an additional interest to this discussion. Lieut. Fremont had lately been engaged in an expedition into the Indian country, and this contact with its wild activities but whetted an appetite already keen with the explorer's enthusiasm.

This was a period of great excitement in our country. Trouble with Mexico was brewing. James Buchanan was Secretary of State. Much of the correspondence and many of the public documents coming to his office were in the Spanish language. These he took to Senator Benton's house for translation. His young daughter did much of this work and thus came to have a comprehensive knowledge of these national questions, a knowledge which she soon made good use of. The necessity for a better acquaintance with this western territory became imperative. In 1842 western influence secured the fitting out of an expedition to the "frontier beyond the Mississippi," as the orders read, and with Lieut. Fremont as its leader. As the government did not wish to have any trouble with England arise at this time, and possibly fearing some hidden reason for its going, insisted that it be conducted as a peaceful, geographical expedition. The western men had to proceed cautiously.

Lieut. Fremont did not like these orders, and with Senator Benton's influence, secured a modification allowing it to go to the Rocky Mountains, with South Pass, the gateway to Oregon, as the particular point to be examined. Those in the secret meant that it should be more than this; that in fact, it should lend a direct aid to the emigration into Oregon in order that we should possess the land ourselves. Miss Benton had now become Lieut. Fremont's wife, and as his secretary, accompanied him to St. Louis, where he was to fit out the expedition. Among other things he added a howitzer to his equipment. This coming to the notice of the department at Washington, the chief of the Topographical Bureau sent an order at once for his return to Washington to explain why, in fitting out a scien-

tific expedition, he had added this military equipment.

Fremont in the meantime, having gotten his party together, had moved to Kaw's Landing (near where Kansas City now stands,) in order that his horses might feed on the tender new grass as a better preparation for the long journey before them. His wife, as his secretary, was to open his mail and forward such as concerned him, together with such supplies as were needed to complete the organization. In this capacity she opened the letter from Washington. When she read its contents she instinctively saw that it would delay and hinder the plans formed with so much care and circumspection, and she also felt that in this order a hidden hand was at work. Her woman's wit grasped the situation, she retained the order and wrote her husband to start at once and ask no questions.

Attached to Fremont's party was a Frenchman, De Rosier, one of his most trusty men. His wife was in St. Louis and soon to be confined. He was with her at this time. Mrs. Fremont feared that duplicate orders might have been sent by some other means. In her quandary she thought of De Rosier, and felt that she could trust him. She sent for him and asked him how soon he could start with a message to Lieut. Fremont. He said "at once." She explained to him the necessity for hurry, and directed him to go overland and by the most direct way, taking advantage of every cut-off he could make. The route this way would be shorter than by the river, the route on which any duplicate orders would probably be sent. In her letter she told Lieut. Fremont that there was need of hurry, and to start at once with the horses in such condition as they were and not to await further supplies. On receipt of her letter he moved at once to Bent's Ford, a long ways westward and quite out of reach of any orders from Washington.

When Mrs. Fremont received this order she was sitting in her room with her work basket by her side doing some sewing for a little daughter. Instead of forwarding this with the rest of the mail, she tucked the order underneath the baby clothes in the basket and sent instead the now famous order. Lieut. Fremont did not know the reasons for her vague but imperative command until eighteen months after, when he returned from this trip. He had faith in his wife and went without a question.

Mrs. Fremont at once wrote to his chief in Washington just what she had done, and giving as her reason the forward state of the

preparations for the expedition, and the lateness of the season which would make necessary a wait of a whole year, if now delayed.

Her father, Senator Benton, approved of her action and defended her so successfully that nothing more was said about it.

In this expedition Lieut. Fremont was accidentally turned into California and traversed a good portion of that Territory. The reports of this expedition electrified the whole country, and aroused a great interest in Europe. In 1842 one thousand emigrants crossed the mountains into Oregon and in 1843 two thousand more went through the pass explored by Fremont. Those living at the time report the excitement both in this country and in Europe as something wonderful. The reports of this expedition led to a third just in time to snatch the golden California from the hands of the British, ready to clutch it (Benton.) Had this second expedition been abandoned at this time, under these orders from Washington, undoubtedly the British would have gained possession, not only of Oregon, but of the whole Pacific Coast.

It was a brave thing for Mrs. Fremont to do, the retaining of this order and the sending the expedition off, but she had faith in her husband, in her father's protection, and in a great western empire for this country.

Thus it was that a woman's wit saved to us California—and the Orient as well.